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THE LITTLE APOCALYPSE

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Every reader of Mark, chap. 13, has noticed that in vss. 5-27 there are two distinct lines of thought, one personal and hortatory (vss. 5-6, 9-13, 21-23) and the other predictive (vss. 7-8, 14-20, 24-27), and that the three predictive sections form a continuous narrative:

(7) When ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be not troubled: these things must needs come to pass; but the end is not yet. (8) For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there shall be earthquakes in divers places; there shall be famines: these things are the beginnings of travail. (14) But when ye see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not (let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judea flee unto the mountains: (15) and let him that is on the housetop not go down, nor enter in, to take anything out of his house: (16) and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. (17) But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! (18) And pray ye that it be not in the winter. (19) For those days shall be tribulation, such as there hath not been the like from the beginning of creation which God created until now, and never shall be. (20) And except the Lord had shortened the days, no flesh would have been saved; but for the elect's sake, whom he chose, he shortened the days. (24) But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, (25) and the stars shall be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens shall be shaken. (26) And then shall they see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. (27) And then shall he send forth his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of earth to the uttermost part of heaven.

This section so evidently forms a closed whole and is so evidently independent of its context that it may be considered separately, without raising the question of whether or not it ever did exist apart from the context. And to this section the name "Little Apocalypse" or "Synoptic Apocalypse" has become applied, for reasons that are obvious.

To determine the meaning that this apocalypse was meant to convey to its first hearers or readers, the primary question to be asked is, How much of this teaching was new? The uncritical modern reader of the gospels thinks, naturally enough, of this section as containing an unheard-of revelation of the future, but this conception is of course erroneous. The Jews of New Testament times were extremely fond of predictions of the events of the end of the world and a really voluminous literature of such predictions existed. Most of it has been lost but enough has survived to give us a very exact idea of its general nature and the first task of the student of the Little Apocalypse is to compare these other predictions of the same kind. Unfortunately, most of the sources that are still extant are in a form not readily accessible to the ordinary reader, but there are three typical apocalypses within the reach of all, the Books of Daniel and of Revelation and Second Esdras (or Fourth Ezra)¹ of the Apocrypha. And in these three works the student will find enough material to make the Little Apocalypse clearly intelligible.

Beginning with vss. 7-8, it is evident that these verses are directed against an assumption that the appearances of wars is to be an immediate token of the end. That such a conception existed is not a matter of speculation, for it is stated explicitly in IV Ezra 9:1-6, where earthquakes, disquietude of peoples, etc., appear as tokens that "it is the very time, wherein the Most High will visit the world which was made by him." And explicitly again 13:31-32: "One shall think to war against another, city against city, place against place, people against people, and kingdom against kingdom. And it shall be, when these things come to pass, and the signs shall happen which I showed thee before, then shall my Son be revealed"; cf. 5:9; 6:24. Such internecine wars as a sign of the end appear again in Rev. 6:1-4; 9:13-20; 17:16; and in Daniel, the king whose rule is to close with the end sweeps out the close of his life in a series of conquests (11:36-45). With this conception the Little Apocalypse agrees in part, but the warning

¹ Ezra is a Jewish work and is, probably, an almost exact contemporary of Revelation, belonging to about the year 93. Possibly it should be dated somewhat earlier, but in any case it uses traditions which are very much earlier.

"be not troubled, the end is not yet" dissents somewhat from the tradition—"these things have, at any rate, no significance for *you*."

Yet they *are* "the beginning of travail," a period of suffering to be followed by a happy release, with a new figure—the Messiah—in the world. The comparison with birth-pangs was inevitable and is found again in Rev. 12:1-5 of the sufferings of the Judaeo-Christian church before the Christ was born and in IV Ezra 4:40-43. Indeed, to later rabbinical writers "birth-pangs of the Messiah" had become the technical term for the sufferings of the nation and world that should precede the final release and it is at least not impossible that the Little Apocalypse is already familiar with the term and uses it in the technical sense.

"Be not disturbed at the beginning of travail, but when ye see the abomination of desolation, *flee!*" The appearance of this abomination, like that of the wars, is not predicted, but is assumed as known, so that an expectation of a force of the most intense evil as a sign of the end must have been widespread. So it appears in IV Ezra. The end of the times is to come through the reign of four beasts (11:39-40), of which the last, the eagle, is to be the worst, and with whose reign the ages of the Most High are fulfilled (11:43), whose coming is to mark the end of the world (14:18). And the end of the world is to come through Esau (6:9). I.e., before the rule of God begins, hostility to God is to reach a climax, and "Ezra" appeals for confirmation of his teaching to the predictions of Daniel (12:11). The parallel with the Little Apocalypse is perfect and it is clear that the prophecies of Daniel had produced a vivid effect on the Jews of New Testament times, convincing them (or securing them in a conviction already reached) that a cataclysmic outburst of diabolic malevolence was at hand (cf. Rev. 12:12). The form it is to take, however, is not specified by the Little Apocalypse. A curious breach of agreement in Mark 13:14, however, points to the conception of something personal "standing where *he* ought not" ("abomination" is neuter, "standing" is masculine). And an early Christian tradition of a personal incorporation of evil is set forth categorically in the Lawless One, the Man of Sin of II Thess. 2:3-12, "who exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshiped" and reappears in the

Antichrist of I John 2:18-22 (not the less personal because *interpreted* to refer to a number of human beings). So in the "false prophet" of Rev. 19:20, battling against the Lamb and overcome by him. So in IV Ezra he is Esau and the eagle. Yet this personal form must not be stressed too far. Not only does I John translate the Antichrist into "many heretics" without apology or explanation. The "false prophet" of Rev. is in 13:11-17 a perfectly transparent figure for the Asiatic priesthood devoted to the emperor-cult and the eagle of IV Ezra, like Esau, is simply the Roman rule. Nor is there anything in the passages in Daniel (8:13-14; 9:27; 11:31; 12:12) that compel the reader to think of a definite person. Something *personified* will evidently answer the purpose quite as well and may be intended in the Little Apocalypse with as much probability as a person. Only in II Thess., chap. 2, does a person seem required, and even there it may be questioned if Paul laid much stress on this point.

"Standing where he ought not." Here neither Daniel nor Paul leaves any doubt as to the meaning. The "little horn" casts down the place of the sanctuary and takes away the continual burnt offering (Dan. 8:11; 11:31; 12:11) and sets up the abomination in place thereof. The Man of Sin sits in the temple of God (II Thess. 2:4). For Revelation and IV Ezra, writing after the destruction of the temple, this point of view was naturally impossible, but even IV Ezra does not think it necessary to modify the statement of one of his sources which placed the final conflict at Mount Zion (13:34-35; cf. Ezek., chaps. 38-39; Zech. 12:9; 14:2). Consequently, with the information at our disposal, "the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not" should be interpreted as "the supreme manifestation of evil invading the temple-sanctuary."²

One thing, however, is very certain. The author of the Little Apocalypse, especially if the author was Jesus himself, knew what he meant by the terms and presupposed that the readers would know what was meant by the terms. For the abomination is mentioned for a practical end—"it will be nothing that can be resisted

² The attempts of Caligula in 39-41 to have a statue of himself erected in the Temple must have stimulated the attention paid to these prophecies of Daniel—if such stimulus was needed.

—flee!” And such a warning would be entirely pointless if nothing recognizable were meant or conveyed. It is altogether probable that a *human* power was meant, as flight is thought of as bringing safety. Perhaps it is not quite impossible that diabolic power was conceived to be terminated by the “mountains,” but the other alternative is vastly more likely. If human power is meant, it is almost certainly the power of Rome that is to be recognized here, as one hardly need argue. “Roman forces in the temple” would be natural, especially when one remembers the morbid dread of temple-desecration by the Romans that had obsessed the minds of the Jews ever since Pompey’s visit to the Holy of Holies. Allowance, however, must be made for the appearance of temporary traditions and it is not possible to deny real plausibility to the interpretation of “where he ought not” as the Holy Land. Those keen enough to foresee the inevitable war and its inevitable consequences might well have looked forward to the moment of the Roman armies’ crossing the boundary as the beginning of the end of all things.

Tribulation will follow, of an unheard-of kind. This prediction is of all features of apocalypses the most stereotyped. Revelation contains three complete cycles of such tribulations (seals, trumpets, and bowls), besides all manner of plagues outside of the cycles. IV Ezra contains four cycles (5:1-12; 6:18-25; 9:1-6; 13:29-34), with many other references. And Mark 13:19 is a virtual quotation of Dan. 12:1*b*, changed only to make the whole world and not merely Israel affected by the tribulation. (As in every apocalypse of New Testament times, the local interest in Palestine has been widened out to include the universe.) The time of this tribulation, however, has been “shortened.” Daniel (7:25; 9:27; 12:7) had prophesied three and a half years as the duration of the tribulation and that this time had been remembered is seen by its reappearance in Rev 11:3; 13:5.³ Hence by the shortening of the time is to be understood a period less than the time set in Daniel. A similar shortening of the times seems to be the thought in IV Ezra 4:26*b* (although explicitly denied in 4:37) but a clear statement occurs

³ It is found also in later Jewish sources.

in the Syriac Baruch⁴ apocalypse (20:1-2): "For see, days come when the times will pass more quickly than they did of old and the seasons run more quickly than those that are past and the years pass away more quickly than do those of the present. For this reason I have rejected Zion, that I may punish the world as speedily as may be." The Little Apocalypse, however, seems to be unique in the motive assigned "for the sake of the elect—otherwise no flesh would be saved." The imagery of the last phrase is that only those left alive at the end will enter into the kingdom, the doctrine of the resurrection being ignored implicitly. The same concept is developed at length in IV Ezra 13:16-20—those that die before the end shall escape great peril, but they shall pass away as a cloud out of the world and shall not see the things that shall happen (cf. 6:25; 7:27). (The same conception has shaped the wording of Mark 13:13*b*.)

In those shortened days, a general catastrophe of nature will take place and the Son of man shall come in clouds. It is probably familiar to all today that the Jews of New Testament times conceived of the Messiah as a heavenly being almost as frequently as they conceived of him as a Davidic king. Both conceptions are found in IV Ezra, the latter in 12:5 (if the longer reading is original), the former in 7:28 ("Jesus" here is a Christian interpolation) and in chap. 13. Particularly significant are 13:2, "that man flew with the clouds of heaven," and 13:12, "I beheld the same man . . . call unto him another multitude which was peaceable." The "gathering of the elect" of Mark 13:27 rests in phraseology (at any rate) on the conception of the return of the Jewish dispersion from the ends of the earth (IV Ezra 3:39-50).

The question asked at the beginning of this study can now be answered: The imagery of the Little Apocalypse contains nothing novel. It is simply a brief allusive summary of the ordinary scheme of the last things that was held by a great number of the Jews of the

⁴ The Apocalypse of Baruch belongs in the period 70-95 A.D. Between it and Ezra literary relations exist that are not very clear but Baruch seems to be the older of the two. As it is preserved in a Syriac translation it is generally quoted as "Syriac Baruch" to distinguish it from a much later work that is preserved in the Greek. Neither has anything to do with the Baruch of the Apocrypha.

same day, with no added details, except the warnings of vss. 7, 15-16. It is very much as if the Apocalypse had said, "The events of the end will be those you have always expected. Two warnings alone need be given you. Pay no attention to the preliminary wars, and when the abomination is revealed, seek instant flight!" Evidently it was for the sake of these warnings alone that the section was composed and it is on these warnings that interpretation must rest.

That the Jews of Palestine in New Testament times were living in a state of eschatological tension is a familiar fact and equally familiar is the fact that it was this hope of immediate divine intervention that encouraged the people in the perfectly hopeless resistance to Rome. The end was at hand, the wars and rumors of wars were the preliminary tokens, the patriot might run to arms in the faith that God would come to aid. Yes, even though the Holy Land was invaded and the holy city besieged—all of this had been foretold. Even though the abomination of desolation had appeared, his rule could not last long. The days were shortened and sturdy resistance to the end would be rewarded with preservation to see the blissful things that should follow!

Placed against the background of this point of view, the meaning of the Little Apocalypse is entirely obvious. The connection of the approaching war with the end is not denied but is assumed as it doubtless was assumed by almost every Jew of the period. The lesson drawn from the fact, however, is different. The approach of the war is not to lead to a sharpening of swords—it is to be regarded with indifference. The appearance of the abomination is not to be withstood manfully—it is to be fled without ceremony and without apology. In plain terms, the Little Apocalypse is simply a warning to its recipients to keep out of the approaching Roman war and everything connected with it. The eschatological imagery, though meant to have its full meaning, is really secondary.

Historically, it was this attitude that the Christians of Palestine adopted, as is related by Eusebius (III, 5) and only less explicitly by the author of Revelation (12:6, 14-16). However faithful Jewish Christians may have been to the national traditions, they

entertained no delusions as to the sanctity of the city, "which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (Rev. 11:8), and which had been guilty of the even worse crime of refusal to repent and be converted after a generation of opportunity. It was true that the desecration of Jerusalem would mean the end of the world, but the Christian felt no vocation to help withstand the ruin. The city deserved all that could come upon it and all that man could do was to stand aside and wait quietly for the end.

Still, it is not legitimate to explain the "tribulation" of Mark 13:19 simply as a historical reference to the siege and fall of Jerusalem. The events of that siege were terrible, after every allowance has been made for the gross exaggerations of Josephus, but even if they had been as horrible as his descriptions they would be far short of "tribulation, such as there hath not been the like from the beginning of the creation which God created until now." No sufferings of a single city, even if that city was Jerusalem, satisfy the conditions of this verse which demand a tribulation as universal as the end of vs. 27 is universal. The sufferings of Jerusalem may have been thought of as the beginning of the tribulation, but they certainly do not exhaust it. The "elect" are conceived to have taken advantage of the warning and to have fled. Yet even their flight would not have saved them, had not the Lord "shortened the days." An attempt to apply this "shortening of the days" to the siege of Jerusalem or the sufferings of Palestine is its own refutation.

Still less legitimate is it, of course, to separate the tribulation from the end and to treat the two as entirely distinct events, unrelated in time. One still reads occasionally in commentaries that two predictions are made here, one of the destruction of Jerusalem within the lifetime of the disciples, and one of the end of the world, at some unfixed time. As a matter of fact, both are in the same "days"—and "shortened days" at that, and no exegetical device can admit of the insertion of some two thousand years in the middle of vs. 24. The expectation of the Little Apocalypse is the same as the expectation of Mark 9:1 or 14:62—of a Parousia within a comparatively short time—and the Little Apocalypse differs from

the other two passages only in that the discussion of preliminary signs is fuller. Religious difficulty that is felt through the non-fulfilment of these promises is a matter for the theologian, not the exegete, to relieve, whether by a simple appeal to a kenotic doctrine, a just reference to the fact that no biblical prophecy is to be treated as "history written in advance," or (most biblical of all) to the argument of Romans, chap. 11.

Finally, can this apocalypse—or its teaching—be referred to Jesus? The answer to this will depend largely on considerations outside the section itself. If a critical examination of the Synoptic Gospels has led to the conclusion that he did not expect his exaltation to celestial messiahship, the question is of course answered negatively. If, however, the contrary position is held, the question is not so simple. Most important is the fact that elsewhere in the Synoptic Gospels great stress is laid on the absence of preliminary signs of the Parousia (Luke 17:26-30; Mark 14:35-36; Matt. 25:13, etc.), while the Little Apocalypse emphasizes the final tribulation. Still, even this is perhaps not entirely conclusive, as the final desolation seems to be part of the end itself, rather than a preliminary sign. The use, moreover, of stereotyped categories of the day to which is attached a practical direction that bears the real weight of the discussion cannot be said to be out of the manner of Jesus, and even about the year 30 the approach of the war with Rome must have seemed clear enough to make it a subject for practical guidance. The restriction of the audience in Mark to "Peter, James, John, and Andrew," is suspicious, and this restriction seems paralleled with remarkable exactness by the words of Eusebius (III, 5), "a revelation vouchsafed to approved men there [in Jerusalem] before the war, to leave the city." From this many scholars have deduced that this "revelation" of Eusebius is really the Little Apocalypse, which was circulated before the war as an esoteric instruction. To be sure, the force of the parallel is broken by the next words in Eusebius, "and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella," while even without this the argument is not conclusive. But in any case, the reader must form his own opinion—the present writer believing that the case for a later origin is "not proved."